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Part-time
Employment of
High School Students:
Literature Review
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is scant empirical work that gauges the degree to which employment during high school is associated with reduced attention to schoolwork or lowered academic achievement. This report reviews two major research studies in this area by, first, documenting the extensiveness of the work involvement of high school youth and second, analyzing the relationship of work intensity to study time, free time spent at school, class rank, knowledge of occupational tasks and the probability of dropping out before completing high school.

Results show that more extensive work involvement is associated with decreased study time and decreased free time at school for some race/sex groups, but no effects on class rank are discovered. Very extensive work of white male sophomores and white female juniors is associated with an increase in their rate of dropping out, but less intensive work involvement of those in most race/sex groups in grade XI actually appears to lead to increased rates of high school completion.

The fact that high school employment may foster high school achievement is explained by the congruence hypothesis, which holds that there is a correspondence between the personality traits promoted and rewarded by employers and those traits promoted and rewarded by teachers. This pattern of effects supports the contention that modest levels of high school employment can instill proper work attitudes and habits, but greater work involvements may interfere with educational progress while providing no additional benefits.

PART-TIME EMPLOYMENT OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: A Review of the Literature

The emergence of work as a setting in which adolescents spend significant amounts of time presents special opportunities as well as problems for educators committed to helping youth make a successful transition from school to work. This report will examine the short-term costs and benefits of part-time employment of youth during the high school years. The report deals solely with youth who hold voluntary part-time jobs in the private sector and whose jobs have not been created through government or educational interventions. The concern is with employment in "naturally occurring" jobs and not with youth employment programs, work experience programs or career education programs.

Several major U.S. youth policy statements (the report of President's Science Advisory Committee, 1973; the report of the National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education, 1973; and the National Panel on High School and Adolescent Education, 1976) have advocated increased work involvement of high school youth. Four assumptions about the workplace underly recommendations for work experience during adolescence: (1) work settings provide young people opportunities to gain experience in taking responsibility for themselves and to assume responsibility for tasks which affect others; (2) work settings provide opportunities for youth to encounter adults who will serve as teachers, socializers and friends; (3) work settings provide opportunities for learning new skills that are not taught in school and for practicing skills previously acquired through formal schooling; and (4) work experience facilitates the development of healthy attitudes towards work.

Recent research does suggest that high school employment can be advantageous in the post-school period. High school graduates who worked while in high school experience much lower

unemployment in the post-school period and find somewhat better jobs than those who did not work (D'Amico, 1973; Meyer & Wise, 1982; Johnston and Bachman, 1973). These longer term payoffs of high school employment may come only at the cost of impaired academic performance. The reasons employment may interfere with academics are straightforward. Most fundamentally, working while attending school may take time away from other important activities such as family life, friends and schooling. The time constraints implied by combining school and work roles may mean that insufficient time can be devoted to studying, with consequent implications for grade achievements. Similarly, extracurricular participation, which has been shown to promote educational outcomes (e.g., Hanks and Eckland, 1976) and psychological adjustment (Otto and Featherman, 1975) and retard delinquency (Landers and Landers, 1978), may also be precluded. All these considerations suggest that employment during the school year may interfere with normal educational progress and that working students may thereby end up with less than their optimal educational credentials.

However, employment and academics may also be complementary. Coleman (1974) and other members of the National Panel on Youth (1974) advocated early employment to foster personality traits desirable in adulthood. In fact, Bowles and Gintis (1976) have made much of the congruency between the personality traits desired and rewarded by employers and teachers. These researchers note evidence that traits such as perseverance, dependability and consistency are modestly correlated with students' grade-point averages and that these same traits are also correlated with supervisor ratings of employees' performance. Bowles and Gintis suggest that this correspondence is more than coincidental and that, in fact, the structure of the school system is designed to inculcate those behavioral traits that employers find desirable in workers. Regardless of the reason for this congruence, however, the above evidence suggests that employment and academics may have mutually reinfor-

cing effects on students. In short, rather than being distracting or detracting, high school employment may actually foster behaviors or traits in students that promote academic success. Survey data from 4,587 high school students indicated that employed students were more likely than unemployed students to have higher grade-point averages, be from higher socioeconomic families or have a parent employed in a higher-status occupation (Schill, 1985).

In the concluding pages of their report, the Panel on Youth acknowledged that "we know very little about the costs of part-time work and academic achievement" (1974:14). Unfortunately, more than a decade later, not much has happened to change this assessment ((D'Amico, 1984; Steinberg et al, 1982). One of the few significant research studies is the ongoing pioneering efforts of Steinberg and Greenberger (1982). For their research, they examined first-time employees. Data were collected from a sample of 531 tenth and eleventh grade students drawn from an initial pool of 3,100 adolescents attending high schools in Orange County, California. To gather data, researchers used survey questionnaires, on-site interviews of the adolescents and interviews with their parents. The research design included both cross-sectional and longitudinal components. Researchers concluded that adolescents who take part-time jobs while in school experience a number of benefits, including development of personal responsibility and acquisition of knowledge about business and consumer matters. However, some of the benefits of working while in school have been overstated. Youth who work show no significant changes in their long-term educational or occupational plans. In addition, working entails costs. It can diminish involvement in school activities, is associated with increased absenteeism, and in some cases, leads to a decline in school performance. These effects are particularly pronounced among youth who work 15 hours or more per week. Their recommendations called for limiting school work to 15 to 20 hours per week, for encouraging youth to take jobs that

provide opportunities for learning and contact with adults, and for closer collaboration among educators and employers.

A more expansive study than Steinberg et al was the research conducted by R. D'Amico. Rather than examining first-time employees only, D'Amico's study involved approximately 4,000 grade 9-12 students over a four-year time span and consisted of a battery of questions on educational and employment experiences. The study documented the extent of high school employment and evaluated its relationship to study time, free time spent at school, class rank, knowledge of occupational tasks and the probability of dropping out before completing school. Effects of both more extensive (20 plus hours) and less intensive (less than 15 hours) work involvement were examined and some effects of work experience on study time and free time at school emerged. Although these effects are not pervasive, more intensive work involvement especially was associated with decreased study time and/or decreased free time at school for some cohorts. However, no detrimental effects of high school employment on class rank emerged for any race (white, Hispanic and black)/sex group, and working was, in fact, associated with improved class standing for white males. Work involvement also appeared to boost the knowledge of work scores for females of (white and minority) racial groups.

When the dropout equations were examined, results showed that for all groups except minority males, less intensive work experience while in grade X1 actually increased the probability of high school completion. Various explanations for this effect were offered, including the congruence hypothesis which holds that there is a correspondence between the personality traits promoted and rewarded by employers and those traits promoted and rewarded by teachers.

Another explanation is the possibility that employment at usually low-wage jobs while in high school might attune youth to the need for educational credentials. At the same time,

very intensive work involvement for white males who were sophomores and white females who were juniors was associated with an increased probability of dropping out of school. Thus very intensive work involvement at a very early age may distract at least some youth from their educational progression. In any case as with other studies investigating these issues, attribution of causality is hazardous.

The overall results of this study suggest two interrelated generalizations. Firstly, the beneficial effects of high school work involvement on class rank and dropout probabilities for some cohorts suggest some support for the congruence model. Until recently, much of the discussion of high school employment has focused on whether or not it had harmful effects and has not considered that work may actually promote scholastic achievement. As Bowles and Gintis (1976) suggest, personality traits valued and rewarded by employers are nearly identical to those rewarded by teachers. This congruence may work to the student's advantage because high school employment may foster personality characteristics relevant to academic achievement.

The second generalization suggested by these results derives from the observation that nearly all of the detrimental effects of high school employment are associated with the variable measuring very intensive work involvement, and nearly all the beneficial effects are associated with the variable measuring less intensive work involvement. This pattern of effects suggest some support for Steinberg et al.'s contention that modest levels of high school employment can instill proper work attitudes and habits, but greater work involvements may interfere with educational progress while providing no additional benefits. What remains to be considered is whether the available employment opportunities for youth allow them to benefit as much as they should from employment experiences.

Finally, the absence of any negative effects of work involvement on class rank provides a contrast to Steinberg et

al.'s (1982) conclusions. The difference in findings can be attributed to a difference in focus: Steinberg focused on first-time employees, but the respondents in D'Amico's class rank equations were seniors. Perhaps young workers or those who have had little work experience some initial difficulties in budgeting the conflicting demands on their time. Older high school workers may quickly learn to adjust their workload and academic schedule to the detriment of neither. In any case, coupled with other findings (Meyer and Wise, 1982) that high school employment can improve the post-school transition to employment, the results of D'Amico's research suggest that timely high school employment at especially moderate levels of work intensity can be an advantageous work experience for youth.

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